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ABSTRACT

School violence and related disruptions have become common occurrences in American schools. This paper examines how violence is manifesting itself in schools. The report offers the results of a study in which a survey was administered to the schools in the midstate area of Tennessee. The survey were created in consultation with school resource officers and were distributed to 202 public school principals. Results, based on 146 returned questionnaires, show that 94 percent of the principals reported that an official safety plan was in place. All principals reported that their respective school boards had discussed the issue of school violence and were concerned about the problem. Most principals believed that many violent altercations among students originated off school grounds, but there was little evidence of significant levels of gang-related activity in the schools. Almost two-thirds of the principals stated that illegal drug use was evident in their schools; 70 percent reported no weapons being confiscated during the past year; 83 percent believed that "zero tolerance" policies had reduced violent or potentially violent situations; 40 percent stated that dress codes had been implemented to improve discipline; and 21 percent of principals recorded that their students had received instruction in conflict resolution. (RJM)

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ISSUES CONCERNING SCHOOL VIOLENCE IN MIDDLE TENNESSEE SCHOOLS

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Problem Statement

School violence and related disruptions have become common occurrences in American schools. School principals face the challenge of coping with and managing these problems. It is important for effective learning and public confidence to have a safe school environment.

Incidents of school violence during the 1997-98 school year have many Americans, especially parents, concerned about whether or not our schools are safe. How schools should prevent or handle those who would or do use weapons, be involved with drugs, or commit acts of vandalism is a persistent topic of public discussion.

This study involved the development of a survey form adapted from consultations with School Resource Officers (law enforcement personnel assigned to work in junior high schools, middle schools and high schools) in the mid-state area of Tennessee. Survey forms were distributed to 202 principals of public schools in forty-two counties in Middle Tennessee.

It is the responsibility of school boards in Tennessee to establish codes of acceptable behavior for students. These codes detail type of behavior expected and consequences for failure to comply. Flagrant violations of the standards of conduct may result in either criminal or civil penalties. School principals have a responsibility to maintain order at school or at any school activity. (T.C.A. 49-6-4012 through 4102).

Presentation of Data

The survey items follow with the accompanying responses from principals.

1. Does your school have an official safety plan to address school violence?

Yes		No	
Number	Percent	Number	Percent
137	94	9*	6

*Principals reported that a plan was in progress.

2. Is there a police/resource officer assigned to your school?

Yes		No	
Number	Percent	Number	Percent
16	22	130	89

3. Has your school board discussed a policy concerned with violence and disruptive behavior?

Yes		No	
Number	Percent	Number	Percent
146	100	0	0

4. Many school situations that become violent originate off school grounds?

Yes		No	
Number	Percent	Number	Percent
95	65	51	35

5. There is evidence of gang related activities in my school?

Yes		No	
Number	Percent	Number	Percent
31	21	115	79

6. The use of illegal drugs is evident in my school?

Yes		No	
Number	Percent	Number	Percent
91	62	55	38

7. Weapons have been confiscated at my school during the past year?

Yes		No	
Number	Percent	Number	Percent
44	30	102	70

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8. "Zero tolerance" policies have reduce violent or potentially violent situations during the past school year?

Yes		No	
Number	Percent	Number	Percent
121	83	25	17

9. Dress codes have been implemented to curtain gain activity or improve discipline?

Yes		No	
Number	Percent	Number	Percent
58	40	88	60

10. Check the locations where violent acts have occurred.

Number	Location
33	Cafeteria
108	Hall Ways
43	Classrooms
52	Gymnasiums
81	Campus
37	Rest Rooms
45	Parking Areas
30	School Buses

11. Students have received instruction in conflict resolution?

Yes		No	
Number	Percent	Number	Percent
31	21	115	79

12. Check the steps listed below being used to create a safe environment.

Number	Safety Procedures
16	On-site Police Resource Officers
134	Controlled access to Buildings and Grounds
2	Metal Detectors
49	Student "I.D." cards
146	Visitors sign in procedures
146	Drug searches
146	Safety drills
146	Alternative Placement

Summary of Findings

Most (94 percent) of the school principals participating in the study reported that an official safety plan was in place. Only six percent of the principals indicated that a safety plan

had not been adopted. It was interesting that only sixteen of the 146 public school principals said that police officers were assigned full-time to their schools.

All principals reported that their respective school boards had discussed the issue of school violence and were concerned about disruptive behavior among students. Sixty-five percent of the respondents in the study believe that many violent altercations among students originate off the school grounds. There is little evidence that there is a significant level of gang related activity in the schools within the study.

Almost two-thirds of the principals stated that illegal drug use occurred in their schools. A majority reported that weapons have not been confiscated at school during the 1997-1998 school year. Some eighty percent of the principals believed that the implementation of "zero tolerance" policies have curtailed violent or potential violent situations at school. About one-half of the principals stated that dress codes have been established to improve discipline and limit gang activity.

Violent acts have occurred in a number of locations in school buildings and their respective campuses. Less than a third of the schools reported that students have received instruction in conflict resolution. However, several measures have been instituted to create a safe school environment. These include such steps as control access to building and grounds, visitor sign-in procedures, safety drills, and alternative of placement of students.

Recommendations for A Safe Learning Environment

1. A plan should be developed outlining procedures for school safety.
2. Make all students, parents, and school personnel aware of policies governing school safety.
3. Have regularly scheduled safety drills.
4. Encourage students to report unsafe conditions, weapons and violent behavior or threats of violent behavior.
5. Develop a system for conflict resolution and peer medication.
6. Monitor buildings and campus on a continuous basis.
7. Maintain proper supervision of students at all times.
8. Keep emergency telephone numbers and directory information about students readily available.
9. Provide opportunities for "open communication" and acceptable ways of expression.
10. Develop a system for reporting school violence and disruptive behavior.

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